ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

By Vincent Canby

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Alice Hyatt (Ellen Burstyn) would seem to be up a creek. She lives in semi-urban New Mexico, married to a human slug who drives a soft-drink truck and who is so alienated from their twelve-year-old son, Tommy (Alfred Lutter), that when we first see the family together it seems as if the father is no more than a particularly unpleasant, demanding boarder. Suddenly and fortuitously everything changes. Donald, Alice's husband, is killed in a highway accident and Alice must take charge of her own life, which, until this time, she has always left in the care of others.

Martin Scorsese's Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, which opened yesterday at the Sutton Theater, is the fine, moving, frequently hilarious tale of Alice's first lurching steps toward some kind of self-awareness and self-sufficiency.

The story moves across the American Southwest as Alice and Tommy, their belongings stuffed into their station wagon, set off on the journey back to Alice's hometown of Monterey, California. The geography is familiar and mostly flat, strewn with motels, drive-in restaurants, taverns, service stations and diners—the bright, shiny artifacts of America's mobile optimism.

The interior landscape of the film is something else again. It's a Krazy Kat world where it's difficult to tell the difference between night and day, between robust laughter and hysterical tears, where the brick that hits you in the head may cause a slight concussion but may also knock some sense into you. The experience is scary but if you keep your wits about you, as Alice ultimately does, the chances are that things will work out. You'll get a slight purchase on survival, on life.

Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore seems especially remarkable because it was directed by the man who first smashed into our consciousness with an entirely different kind of movie, Mean Streets, a male-dominated melodrama about life in New York's Little Italy.

Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore is an American comedy of the sort of vitality that dazzles European film critics and we take for granted. It's full of attachments and associations to very particular times and places, even in the various regional accents of its characters. It's
beautifully written (by Robert Getchell) and acted, but it's not especially neatly tailored.

It begins rather badly, with an unnecessary sequence showing Alice as a little girl, and then jumps forward to Alice's home life with her slob husband, played at such a high pitch you're not sure that Mr. Scorsese and the actors will be able to sustain whatever it is they are about. You don't know at first. It's a comedy that creeps up on you, somewhere near the Arizona state line, as Tommy begins to get on Alice's nerves by threatening to be carsick.

At the center of the movie and giving it a visible sensibility is Miss Burstyn, one of the few actresses at work today (another is Glenda Jackson) who is able to seem appealing, tough, intelligent, funny, and bereft, all at approximately the same moment.

It's Miss Burstyn's movie and part of the enjoyment of the film is in the director's apparent awareness of this fact, as in a sequence in which Alice is making a little extra money by singing and playing ersatz cocktail-piano in a roadside tavern. Alice is never going to bring show business to its knees, but the beer drinkers love her and Mr. Scorsese circles his camera around her as lyrically as if she were Ida Lupino knocking the customers dead in Road House.

Of equal but less spectacular importance are the supporting players, including the men. Although this is a movie that takes women seriously, and although it is essentially the chronicle of Alice's liberation, Mr. Scorsese has not shortchanged the actors, especially Harvey Keitel, as a small-town sadist who traps Alice for a while; Kris Kristofferson, as the comparatively gentle rancher who wins her; and Alfred Lutter, as her son who, when the chips are down, is not at all bad.

Two other performances must be noted, those of Diane Ladd and Valerie Curtin as waitresses in a diner where Alice works. Their marvelous contributions in small roles are a measure of the film's quality and of Mr. Scorsese's fully realized talents as one of the best of the new American film-makers.

**ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE (MOVIE)**

Directed by Martin Scorsese; written by Robert Getchell; director of photography, Kent L. Wakeford; edited by Marcia Lucas; music by Richard La Salle; production designer, Toby Rafelson; produced by David Susskind and Audrey Maas; released by Warner Brothers. Running time: 113 minutes.

With: Ellen Burstyn (Alice Hyatt), Kris Kristofferson (David), Alfred Lutter (Tommy), Harvey Keitel (Ben), Diane Ladd (Flo), Lelia Goldoni (Bea), Jodie Foster (Audrey), Valerie Curtin (Vera), Billy Green Bush (Donald), Lane Bradbury (Rita), and Vic Tayback (Mel).